SHELBY[1]

By CHARLES HANSON TOWNE

(From *The Smart Set.*)

WHEN I sit down to write of Shelby — Lucien Atterwood Shelby, the author, whose romantic books you must have read, or at least heard of — I find myself at some difficulty to know where to begin. I knew him so well at one time — so little at another; and men, like houses, change with the years. Today's tenant in some old mansion may not view the garden as you did long ago; and the friend of a man's later years may not hold the same opinions the acquaintance of an earlier period once formed.

I think it best to begin with the time I met Shelby on the newspaper where we both, as cub reporters, worked. That was exactly twenty years ago.

The boys didn't take to Shelby. He was too dapper, too good-looking, and he always carried a stick, as he called it; we were unregenerate enough to say cane. And, most loathsome of all, he had an English accent — though he was born in Illinois, we afterwards learned. You can imagine how this accent nettled us, for we were all unassuming lads — chaps, Shelby would have called us — and we detested " side."

But how this new acquisition to the staff could write! It bothered us to see him hammer out a story in no time, for most of us had to work over our copy, and we made Hanscher, the old managing editor, raving mad sometimes with our dilatoriness. I am afraid that in those sadly distant days we frequented too many bars, and no doubt we wasted some of our energy and decreased our efficiency. But every young reporter drank more or less;

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and when Shelby didn't mix with us, and we discovered that he took red wine with his dinner at Mouqin's — invariably alone — we hated him more than ever.

I remember well how Stanton, the biggest-hearted fellow the Lord ever let live, announced one night in the copy room that he was going to get Shelby tight or die in the attempt, and how loud a laugh went up at his expense.

"It can't be done," was the verdict.

The man hadn't enough humanity, we figured. He was forever dramatizing himself, forever attitudinizing. And those various suits of his — how they agonized us! We were slouches, I know, with rumpled hair and, I fear not overparticular as to our linen during the greater part of the week. Some of us had families to support, even in those young days — or at least a father or a mother up the State to whom we had to send a monthly cheque out of our meagre wages.

I can't say that we were envious of Shelby because of his single-blessedness — he was only twenty-two at that time; but it hurt us to know that he didn't really have to work in Herald Square, and that he had neat bachelor quarters down in Gramercy Park, and a respectable club or two, and week-ended almost where he chose. His blond hair was always beautifully plastered over a fine brow, and he would never soil his forehead by wearing a green shade when he bent over his typewriter late at night. That would have robbed him of some of his dignity, made him look anything but the English gentleman he was so anxious to appear.

I think he looked upon us as just so much dust beneath his feet. He would say "Good evening" in a way that irritated every one of us — as though the words had to be got out somehow, and he might as well say them and get them over with, and as though he dreaded any reply. You couldn't have slapped him on the back even if you had felt the impulse; he wasn't the to-be-slapped kind. And of course that means that he wouldn't have slapped any of us, either. And he was the type you couldn't call by his first name.

Looking back, I sometimes think of all that he missed

in the way of good-fellowship; for we were the most decent staff in New York, as honest and generous and warmly human a bunch as anyone could hope to find. We were ambitious, too, mostly college men, and we had that passion for good writing, perhaps not in ourselves, but in others, which is so often the newspaper man's special endowment. We were swift to recognize a fine passage in one another's copy; and praise from old Hanscher meant a royal little dinner at Engel's with mugs of cream ale, and an hour's difference in our arrival at the office next day. Oh, happy, vanished times! Magic moments that peeped through the grayness of hard work, and made the whole game so worth while.

Well, Stanton won out. He told us about it afterwards.

On the pretext that he wanted to ask Shelby's advice about some important personal matter, he urged him to let him give him as good a meal as Mouqin could provide, with a certain vintage of French wine which he knew Shelby was fond of. There were cocktails to begin with, though Shelby had intimated more than once that he abominated the bourgeois American habit of indulging in such poison. And there was an onion soup *au gratin*, a casserole, and artichokes, and special coffee, and I don't know what else.

"He got positively human," Stanton put it, later, as we clustered round him in the copy room. (Shelby hadn't turned up.) "I don't like him, you know; and at first it was hard to get through the soup; but I acted up, gave him a song and dance about my mythical business matter — I think he feared I was going to 'touch him' — and finally got a little tipsy myself. From then on it was easy. It was like a game."

It seems that afterwards, arm in arm, they walked out into Sixth Avenue in the soft snow — it was winter, and the Burgundy had done the trick — and Shelby, his inhibitions completely gone, began to weep.

"Why are you crying?" Stanton asked, his own voice thick.

"Because you fellers don't like me!" Shelby choked out.

The accent and the stick went together into the gutter,

Stanton laughingly told us. An immortal moment! The poseur with his mask off, at last! Beneath all that grease-paint and charlatanism there was a solid, suffering, lonely man; and even in his own dazed condition Stanton was quick to recognize it, and to rejoice in the revelation.

Moreover, he was flattered, as we always are, when our own judgments have proved right. Stanton had deliberately set out to find the real Shelby — and he had.

"A man who can write as he can has something in him — that I know," he had said generously more than once. He made us see that he had not been wrong.

But it was not the real Shelby that returned to the office. That is where he missed his great opportunity. Back strutted the pompous, stained-glass, pitiful imitation of an Englishman, in a louder suit than ever, and with a big new cane that made the old one look flimsy.

We despised him more than ever. For we would have taken him within our little circle gladly after Stanton's sure report; and there would have been chance after chance for him to make good with us. But no; he preferred the pose of aloofness, and his face betrayed that he was ashamed of that one night's weakness. He never alluded to his evening with Stanton; and when Minckle, who was certain the ice had been broken, put his arm around his shoulder the next day, he looked and drawled,

" I say, old top, I wish you wouldn't."

Of course that finished him with us.

" He can go to the devil," we said.

We wanted him fired, obliterated; but the very next evening there was a murder in Harlem, and old Hanscher sent Shelby to cover it, and his first-page story was the talk of the town. We were sports enough to tell him what a wonderful thing he had done. He only smiled, said " Thanks," and went on at his typewriter.

II

It was shortly after this that Marguerite Davis assailed New York with her beauty — a young actress with a wealth of hair and the kind of eyes you dream of. She captured the critics and the public alike. Her name was

on every lip and the Broadway theater where she starred in "The Great Happiness" was packed to the doors. Such acclaim was never received by any young woman. We heard that Shelby went every night for a week to see some part of the play — he couldn't, because of his assignments, view the entire performance; and it was Minckle who, after the piece had been running a month in New York, found a photograph of the star in the top drawer of Shelby's desk. He had gone there for a match — you know how informal we newspaper men are. Moreover, the picture had been autographed.

"I wish you wouldn't touch that." It was Shelby's voice. Of course he had come in at the very moment poor Minckle made his startling discovery.

With quiet dignity, and with a flush on his cheeks, Shelby took the photograph from Minckle's hand, and replaced it in the drawer.

"I always keep matches on top of my desk — when I have any," he said, in a voice like ice.

There was no denying his justified anger. No man likes to have his heart secrets disclosed; and Shelby knew that even the Associated Press could not give more publicity to the discovery than Minckle could. He dreaded — and justly, I think — the wagging of heads that would be noticed from now on, the pitiless interest in his amour.

Stanton was the only one of us, except myself, later, who ever was privileged, if you care to put it that way, to visit Shelby's apartment — diggings, Shelby always called them. There, on the walls, he told us, were innumerable photographs of Miss Davis, in every conceivable pose. They looked out at one from delicate and heavy frames; and some were stuck informally in the mirror of his dresser, as though casually placed there to lighten up the beginning of each day, or perhaps because there was no other space for them.

"You must know her awfully well," Stanton ventured once.

"I have never met the lady," was all Shelby said; and Stanton told me there was a sigh that followed the remark.

"What!" this full-blooded young American reporter cried, astounded. "You've never met this girl, and yet you have all these — all these pictures of her?"

"I don't want to lose my dream, my illusion," was Shelby's answer.

A man who would not meet the toast of Broadway — and Fifth Avenue, for that matter — if he could, was, to Stanton and the rest of us, inconceivable.

It was at the close of that winter that Shelby left us. Some there were who said he was suffering from a broken heart. At any rate, he began to free-lance; and the first of those fascinating romantic short stories that he did so well appeared in one of the magazines. There was always a poignant note in them. They dealt with lonely men who brooded in secret on some unattainable woman of dreams. This sounds precious; but the tales were saved from utter banality by a certain richness of style, a flow and fervour that carried the reader on through twenty pages without his knowing it. They struck a fresh note, they were filled with the fire of youth, and the scenes were always laid in some far country, which gave them, oddly enough, a greater reality. Shelby could pile on adjectives as no other writer of his day, I always thought, and he could weave a tapestry, or create an embroidery of words that was almost magical.

He made a good deal of money, I believe, during those first few months after he went away from Herald Square. Apparently he had no friends, and, as I have said, invariably he seemed to dine alone at Mouquin's, at a corner table. Afterwards, he would go around to the Café Martin, then in its glory, where Fifth Avenue and Broadway meet, for his coffee and a golden liqueur and a cigarette. That flaming room, which we who were fortunate enough to have our youth come to a glorious fruition in 1902, attracted us all like a magnet. Here absinthe dripped into tall glasses, and the seats around the sides, the great mirrors and the golden curtains, which fluttered in summer and remained austerely in place in winter, made a little heaven for us all, and life one long cry of joy. Here women, like strange flowers that bloomed only at night, smiled and laughed the hours away; and the

low whirr of Broadway drifted in, while the faint thunder of Fifth Avenue lent an added mystery to the place, as though the troubled world were shut out but could be reached again in an instant, if you wished to reach it.

Shelby liked to be seen in such places. He said he felt that he was on the Continent, and he liked to get nervously excited over a liqueur and a mazagan of coffee, and then flee to his cozy lodgings in Gramercy Park and produce page after page of closely written manuscript.

The pictures of Marguerite Davis remained a part of the furnishings of those rooms of his — that we heard; and I knew it directly shortly after this. For I, too, left the newspaper, and went into the magazine-editing game. I found a berth on that same popular periodical to which Shelby was then contributing his matchless stories; and part of my job was to see him frequently, take him to luncheon or dinner, talk over his future plans with him, discuss the possibility of his doing a novelette which later he could expand into a full-sized volume and thereby gain an added vogue.

It was during this period that I came to know him so well — came to know him, that is, as intimately as he wished to be known. Always there was a cloak of reserve which he put on with me, as with every one. I tried to broaden his horizon, to have him meet other men — and women. He would go with me once or twice to some party, for he was clever enough to see that he must not offend me, just as he knew that I must not offend him. We were too valuable to each other, and in that odd mixing up of our affairs in this world here we were, after so brief an interval, in the relationship of editor and contributor.

He knew, however, that I had always admired his literary gifts; but I confess that the feet of clay began to creep into view when he told me, one night at the Martin, that his favorite novelist of all time was — Marion Crawford! That explained so much to me that I had not understood before. I smiled tolerantly, for my own taste ran much higher; and I seemed from then on to sense a certain cheapness in Shelby's mind, as if I had lifted the

cloth over a chair and discovered cherrywood where I had hoped to find Chippendale. It is through such marginalia that we come to know people. I could not reconcile Shelby's delicate style with so forlorn a taste for other literary dishes. I said then that he would never become a great writer. He would simply mark time, artistically speaking, after reaching a certain point. Thereafter everything he produced would be but repetition.

I was right. His virgin novel proved a rank failure. The man could do nothing sustained. He was essentially a person of brilliant flashes. The book, called, as you may remember, " The Shadow and the Substance," was a *tour de force* in vapid writing, and it almost severed his literary jugular vein. All the reviewers, delighted with a chance to play upon his title, said it contained far more shadow than substance.

Shelby had had easy sailing up till that time. His pride was hurt by the reception of the book; and he told me he was going to flee to London — which he straightway did. Then I heard of him in his beloved England; and from there he sent me several short manuscripts filled with his old grace and charm of style — a sort of challenge to his critics. But always we waited for the story with a punch; for the story that would show there was a soul in the fellow. These pale blossoms were all very well — as magazine bait to capture the young girl reader of our smart periodical; but too many of them cloyed. It was as though you served a banquet and made *hors d'œuvres* the main dish.

Yet his popularity with our readers was tremendous. Letters, addressed in feminine handwriting, came to him in our care every day, from all over the land; and he was no doubt flattered by silly women who were fascinated even more by his fiction after we printed his romantic photograph. For he had a profile that captivated many a girl, eyes that seemed to speak volumes; and no doubt there were numerous boudoirs that contained his picture, just as his rooms contained so many likenesses of Marguerite Davis.

I next heard of him in Egypt, where he said he was

gathering colour for a new romance. He stayed away several months, and then blew in one morning, better-looking than ever, brown and clear-eyed. He had been all over the Orient, and he said his note-book was full of material. Now he could sit down quietly and write. He had so much to put on paper, he told me.

But he hadn't. He dreamed adventure, he craved adventure; but nothing ever happened to him. His trips were invariably on glassy seas. He traveled by himself — he hadn't even one chum whom he cared to have share his joys; and though he penetrated the jungles of Africa at one time, the lions remained mysteriously in hiding, and the jaguars didn't even growl.

I remember that this came out one night at a dinner party he and I went to at the home of a friend of mine. A Captain Diehart was there — a most delightful man of fifty or so, who had just returned from a trip around the world; and he fascinated us all by his lively recounting of certain dramatic happenings in the Far East. Zulus had captured him once, and he had come perilously close to death on so many occasions that it was a miracle that he should be sitting here now, sipping his champagne and smoking his cigarette.

On the way home — I had a habit of seeing Shelby to his doorstep during this period — he turned to me and said:

"Isn't it strange, Allison, that nothing of that kind has ever happened to me? I move about all the while, I look eagerly for excitement, I hope always for the supreme adventure — and I never find it. Yet I love romance. Why does it never come to me?"

I was silent for a few paces. I felt so sorry for him. For once he had told me what was in his heart.

"You're in love with love," I said finally. "That's what's the matter with your work, Shelby, if you'll let me say so. I wonder if you have really loved a woman — or a friend, even? If the great thing should come into your life, wouldn't it illuminate your whole literary expression? Wouldn't you write eighty per cent better? Wouldn't everything you do be sharpened splendidly alive? Why don't you meet — Miss Davis?"

"My God, man!" he let out. "Won't you allow me to keep at least one dream?"

He tried to be tragic right there in the street; but I read him like a book.

"Don't be an ass, old fellow. You're not a poet, you know — you're a happy dabbler in prose; but you've got to wake up — you've got to have some vital experience before you can hope to reach the top. This vicarious loving isn't worth a tin whistle. You're like a soldier in the barracks compared to one who's in the thick of the fight. Wake up, shake yourself, get out of your shell, and see how much greater you'll be!"

He didn't like that. He never liked the truth. How few of us do!

The next thing I knew he was off for Japan, and he sent me pretty post-cards of geisha-girls, and tried to indicate that he was having the time of his life, at last. But there was something false — I cannot quite express it — about his messages. They didn't ring true at all. He knew it, and he knew that I knew it.

III

When he came back, after a year or so, there was a vast change in him. He was more sure of himself; and in the Martin one night he told me how various other periodicals were now after him. His rate would have to go up, and all that sort of thing. He liked me, and *The Athenian*, but one must grow, and there were wider fields for him to penetrate; and it was all right that we had made him what he was, but in the final summing up a man must think of himself, and one's career was one's career, you know. He brought in several fashionable names, I remember — I don't recall just how he did it, but he tried to appear casual when he spoke of Mrs Thus-and-So, who had a mansion on Fifth Avenue; and he indicated that he often dined there now. They had met in the Orient, and Reggie was a corker, too, and he might summer at Newport, and what did I think of an offer of five thousand dollars from a great weekly for a serial dealing with high life?

He sickened me that evening. Yes, he was a prig, a snob, and I don't know what else. Frankly and coldly I told him to go to the dickens. Our magazine had existed without him once upon a time, and it could go on existing without him. I was sorry to see him make such a fool of himself.

His whole attitude changed.

"Oh, don't think I mean all I say, Allison!" he pleaded. "I'll continue to give you something now and again. After all, I've got a wide audience with you people, and I don't quite wish to lose it."

That irritated me more than ever — his stupid patronage, his abominable self-assurance. I remember paying the check very grandiloquently, and leaving him alone — as he was so fond of being, at one time — in the center of the room.

When we met thereafter of course we were exceedingly chilly to each other. Once I saw him with Mrs. Thus-and-So, and he cut me dead. I suppose I looked painfully inadequate, utterly unimportant to him that afternoon. He had moved to higher circles; and after all I was only a struggling young editor, who dressed rather badly —; all right for certain occasions, but hardly one to be seen bowing to at a moment like this! I read his mind, you see; and again he knew that I knew; and of course he hated me from that time forth.

It was at this time that the phrase, "See America First," came into such wide circulation. It was considered the thing to look over the Grand Canyon or the Yellowstone Park, or to run down to Florida, rather than cross the ocean; and I next heard of Shelby in the West, diligently writing — for other magazines. He had brought out one more novel, "The Orange Sunset," and it had gone far better than the first, which must have heartened him and given him a fresh impetus. He changed book publishers, too — went to a smarter firm who did much for him in the way of publicity. And special editions, in limp covers, helped his sales. Even his short stories were brought out, and as little brochures, in gorgeous binding with colored illustrations, a single tale would attract the romantic maiden. It was a chocolate-cream appeal;

but cream-drops have their uses in this weary world.

The San Francisco earthquake — I believe they always allude to it out there as "the fire"— occurred — that next year; and Stanton, who had succeeded old Hanscher in Herald Square — the latter had died in harness at his desk — heard, in that mysterious way that newspaper men hear everything, that Shelby was in the ill-fated city when the earth rocked on that disastrous night. Immediately he telegraphed him, "Write two thousand words of your experiences, your sensations in calamity. Wire them immediately. Big check awaits you."

Silence followed. Stanton and I talked it over, and we concluded that Shelby must have been killed.

"If he isn't dead, here at last is the great adventure he has been longing for," I couldn't help saying.

No word ever came from him; but two weeks later he blew into town, and again Stanton found out that he had arrived.

"Why didn't you answer my wire?" he telephoned him.

"I couldn't," Shelby rather whimpered over the line. "You see, Stanton, old top, the thing got me too deeply. I just couldn't — I hope you'll understand — write one word of it."

But it was not the grief of the man who feels so deeply that he cannot shed a tear. It was the craven in Shelby that had shocked the meretricious Shelby into insensibility, into utter inarticulateness in one of the crowning disasters of the ages.

In the face of something so real, so terribly real, he was but a puny worm, with no vocabulary to express his emotions — for he had none, save the emotion of fear. That we knew from people who had been at the same hotel where he was stopping when the great shock came. He ran through the corridors like a frightened doe, in pajamas of silk, with wonderful tassels of green. He wrung his hands, and babbled like a lunatic. "Oh, my manuscripts! My manuscripts!" were the only intelligible words that came from his white lips.

Think of it! He thought of those piffling stories — those stories of unreality, when he was experiencing the

biggest thing that ever came into his little life! Do you wonder that we cared even less for him after that? That I refused to see him at all, and that even wise, understanding Bill Stanton couldn't touch his syndicate stuff?

IV

There is, of necessity, a hiatus here. One cannot write of what one does not know. I lost all trace of Shelby during the intervening years, except that I saw spasmodic productions of his in various periodicals, and guessed that he must be working in those same bachelor quarters probably still surrounded with the pictures of Miss Davis. There were rumors, also, that he went frequently to the opera with very grand people, and dined and supped on Lower as well as Upper Fifth Avenue. It was whispered in editorial circles that he had come to care more as to where he could dine next week than how he could write next week. You see, he was most personable, and he could flatter ladies, and drink like a gentleman, and wear his evening clothes to perfection — he still had them made in London — and that sort of unmarried man is always in demand in New York. Add to these social graces the piquancy of a little literary reputation, and you have the perfect male butterfly.

Shelby fluttered his way through the corridors and drawing rooms of the rich, and his later work, if you will notice, always touches upon what is called smart society. We heard that he never mentioned his newspaper days — that he was not a little ashamed of having spent so many months bending over a typewriter in a dingy, cluttered office. Yet it was there he had learned to write; and had he been true to the best traditions of those days of exciting assignments, how far he might have gone on the long literary road!

The war came. Of course Shelby was beyond the draft age — quite far beyond it; but he had no ties, was in perfect physical condition, and he might have found in the trenches another contact that would have made a thorough man of him. Again, he had always loved England and the English so dearly that it would not have

been surprising had he offered his services in some way to that country when she and her allies so needed assistance. But the lists of those who offered their lives then may be searched in vain for Shelby's name.

I heard vaguely that he had gone to Borneo in September, 1914; and there he remained, "to avoid such a nasty mess as the world had come to." You see, his was a process of evasion. He loved romance when it was sweet and beautiful; but he had not the vision to understand that there is also a hard, stern, iron romance — the romance of men's companionships in difficult places.

How he did it, I never knew; but he returned from Borneo a year later, and handed to his publishers a novel called "The Blowing Rose," which dealt, as its title would indicate, with anything but the War — a sentimental tale of the old South, full of lattices and siestas through long, slow afternoons, and whispered words of love, and light conversations at dusk, and all that sort of rot. And all the while, outside his door the guns were booming; at the gates of the world a perilous storm had broken. The earth was on fire; but while Rome burned, he, like Nero, played a fiddle — and was content.

Then he wrote a comedy of British manners, and nothing would do but that he must himself journey to London in war-time to see about its production there.

Stanton and I happened to see him the day before he sailed. We met him face to face on Fifth Avenue, and he bowed to us. We returned the salute, little dreaming that never again would we see him.

For Shelby sailed on the *Lusitania*.

There must be a hiatus here, too; for no one saw him die. The story runs that he must have been in his cabin when the awful moment came — that he was drowned like a rat in a trap. I wonder. And I wonder if he knew in that agonizing instant that he was doomed? But was it not better to die than to emerge again from so great a calamity — so historical an episode — as he had once before emerged, and find himself again inarticulate? At least there can be some glory for him now; for one likes to think that, after all, he might have told us how he felt in so supreme a moment, and linked it, through

his delicate art, with his San Francisco sensations. Could those have been revived, and put upon paper? Could Shelby ever have made a fine gesture, know himself as we knew him, and told the truth.

I doubt it. For, looking over his published works tonight, I find only one or two epigrams worthy of a brief existence. And one of those I am sure he filched from an English wit, and redressed it for his purposes. That was the only time he cared for American tailoring.

But poor Shelby! Vicarious, indeed, were all the experiences, save two, of his shallow days. But in the face of each, he was speechless. There is a law of averages, a law of compensation, you know. The balance wheel turns; the tides change; the sands of occasion shift. Fate gave this man one overwhelmingly glorious chance to say something. He was mute. The second time she sealed his lips forever.